

***Colonialism and the Anthropocene in Crossing Open Ground by Barry Lopez*****Yapo Ettien**

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Abstract

In Crossing Open Ground (1989), Barry Lopez highlights the humanity-nature relationship during his travel to remote regions of North America. In fact, he shares his experiences of the impact of human actions on nature which has led to the worrying problem of climate change. Through historical, ecocritical, eco-Marxist and postcolonial approaches, we explore the imperial process of dispossession of Native Americans' land, the core of their civilization, and other properties after being subjugated by Europeans. European colonialism and imperialism consisted in exploiting American continent by looting gold, silver, and diamond that fueled European monarchies. In modern America, life is determined by the capitalist mode of production, its mode of distribution and consumption, its cultural values, and social reproduction. Although capitalism tries to preserve nature, it remains unsustainable because competition for profit, its driving force, implies a blind tendency to limitless exploitation of natural resources to assure modernity and development. The capitalist exploitation of resources has resulted in the Anthropocene defined as human-caused changes of the natural ecosystem, and the socio-ecological and economic crises experienced by the globe. Barry Lopez gives evidence that human effect on nature is destructive. This means that humans' influence on the environment entails extinction in an ecological sense.

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Introduction

Climate change has become so worrying that it has led global scientists, activists, writers, political authorities, artists, film makers, and ordinary citizens to question human action and conquest of nature through writing, films, and conferences such as the UN Climate Change Conference (COP 21) in Paris, France, and so on. Among the writers, Barry Lopez, an American author, stands out for his environmental activism through his publications. In *Crossing Open Ground*, he travels to remote regions of North America to explore the humanity-nature relationship. Through this exploration, on the one hand he sets up the imperial conquest and the control of Native Americans, their lands and goods by Europeans. On the other hand, he evokes the Anthropocene, human-caused changes of the natural ecosystem, engendered by the exploitation of American land and goods imposed by the capitalist economy from the colonial period to fully modern America. This exploration by Barry Lopez summons us to think of the systems of exploitation of nature by humans. Thus, the objective of this paper is to understand the historical and ongoing relationship between colonialism and contemporary environmental crises. By examining how colonialism has shaped the Anthropocene, our aim is to reveal the destructive practices that have led to the current environmental crises. This understanding is relevant for developing more just and sustainable solutions for the degradation of our planet. To achieve this objective, our arguments will draw on historical, ecocritical, eco-Marxist and post-colonial approaches. The paper is structured as follows: the first section exposes the imperial process of dispossession of Native Americans. The second discusses capitalism and the exploitation of American resources. The last analyzes the Anthropocene and the socio-ecological and economic crises engendered by the exploitation of American continent.

The Imperial Process of Dispossession

In *Crossing Open Ground*, Barry Lopez starts to present European imperialism and the dispossession of Native Americans' land and other properties from the first chapter. Historically, European's settlement in the New World started in the fifteenth century after the discovery of the continent by Christopher Columbus in 1492. The Spanish were the first to settle simply because Spain was an empire and Christopher

voyages were financed by the Spanish monarch. Barry Lopez evokes the Spanish settlement by making a precision that Europeans did not enter the western part of America, precisely the California desert until the end of the eighteenth century, 250 years after Coronado brought his soldiers into the Zuni pueblos. He also reveals that Hernando Cortés, another Spanish "conquistadores" and four hundred Spanish soldiers had been received as "demi-gods" [1]. (193)

Metaphorically, "demi-gods" means that European conquerors were powerful and barbarous and testifies the dramatic characteristics of Europeans' conquest of America. It also justifies Ania Loomba's idea according to which "colonialism was not an identical process in different parts of the world but everywhere it locked the original inhabitants and the newcomers into the most complex and traumatic relationships in human history. Colonialism and imperialism are often used interchangeably [2]. Imperialism is the political, cultural, and economic domination of a powerful nation over a weaker area. As to Colonialism, it can be defined as the conquest and control of other people's land and goods. In other words, colonialism is the desire to subjugate humans with their natural worlds by other humans [2]. Consequently, the image of Cortés burning the aviaries is simply an image of a kind of destructive madness that lies at the heart of imperialistic conquest. (197)

In the efforts to put the theory of imperialism into actual practice, Europeans adopted mercantilism as their political and economic policy. In a mercantile system, the government controls all the economic activities in an effort to strengthen national power by selling more than it buys from other nations. The strengthening of the national power entails the accumulation of wealth by plundering and looting goods from the dominated societies. To succeed in achieving this objective, the first thing Europeans did was to strip Native Americans' land and encroach on it. The names of the land conquered and dispossessed were changed: "[...] what had been Spain's became Mexico's and [...] what had been Mexico's became America's". (2)

Undoubtedly, the land is at the core of Native American civilization. Native Americans believe that all living beings have spirits so that animals and plants are revered. In addition, they believe in cosmic forces

which refer to the existence of a powerful and mysterious energy in the universe. Concerning the land, Barry Lopez states:

The land is thought to exhibit a sacred order. That order is the basis of ritual. The rituals themselves reveal the power in that order. Art, architecture, vocabulary, and costume, as well as ritual, are derived from the perceived natural order of the universe – from observations and meditations on the exterior landscape. An indigenous philosophy – metaphysics, ethics, epistemology, aesthetics, and logic – may also be derived from a people's continuous attentiveness to both the obvious (scientific) and ineffable (artistic) orders of the local landscape. Each individual, further, undertakes to order his interior landscape according to the exterior landscape. To succeed in this means to achieve a balance state of mental health. (67)

For Barry Lopez, land reveals the sacredness and power of nature in Native Americans' culture. It means the rituals, based on the sacred order exhibited by land, coincide with religion and culture concomitantly. Indeed, land represents the heart and soul of Native Americans. It affects the social cohesion and equilibrium of their society because it is a symbol that guides their beliefs and behavior. In terms of cultural legacy development, land is consistently a mechanistically paradigmatic means of sociocultural appropriation, transformation, and integration. So, their adaptability to practically any ecological condition is remarkable, and it makes them unique; hence, their devotion to protecting nature. Unfortunately, although they protected it for thousands of years, it was dispossessed by Europeans. Its exploitation consisted of looting gold, silver, and diamond that fueled European monarchies. To quench resentment from Native Americans, they told them that their relationships with the land were worthless and primitive. (89)

The paraphrase above unveils the relationships that existed between the colonizers, the civilized Europeans, and the colonized or the "savage" Native Americans. It is expressive of the denial of all humanity to Native Americans. They were regarded as savages. That is to say, their lands were stripped out, their political and social institutions trampled underfoot, their culture partially wiped out, their

religion shattered. In other words, their society was drained of its essential elements. Considering such a such a decadence of the colonized society, Aimé Césaire has coined and stated the following equation: "colonization = "thing-ification" [3].

Indeed, between Europeans and Native Americans, there was a relationship of domination and submission. Europeans held a privileged position derived from the colonial system. They were granted economic benefits, they belonged to the highest social status, and had greater political power, all resulting from the subjugation of the Native Americans.

As Native Americans realized that Europeans' objective was to strip them of their ancestral ways of life, they organized massive rebellions which explained the clash of cultures, a violent meeting of European and Native American cultures. Europeans were Christians, Native Americans believed in the cosmic forces of nature. Europeans launched a massive effort to convert them into Catholic servants. Thus, they ensued a state of perpetual enmity in which the Natives were killed. Culture, being a set of values, beliefs, and behavior of a group of people, transmitted from one generation to the next, the dispossession of their land made them vulnerable as it disorganized the cultural, economic, and political structures of their societies.

To sum up, European imperialism in America was a strategy aimed at stripping out Native Americans' land and their ancestral ways of life. Under Europeans' domination, Native Americans did not have any ownership of their cultural heritage. After America's independence, Europeans established their own nations-states throughout American continent in which they expanded European values and white supremacy. And to perpetuate their so-called superiority, they perpetrated a continual injustice vis-à-vis Native Americans. In the name of development, they installed capitalism as their economic system.

The Capitalist Exploitation of Resources

In *Crossing Open Ground*, Barry Lopez explores the exploitive relationship between humanity and nature. In doing so, he alludes to capitalism, an economic system adopted by North American countries, namely the United States and Canada, the setting of his work. In *An Introduction to Capitalism*, Eamonn Butler defines

capitalism as “a general way of economic life in which people create and apply capital goods in order to produce, as productively as possible, the goods and services that they and others want [4].” Capitalism is associated with the ownership of property by private individuals and groups.

As to Karl Marx, he theorized capitalism as the accumulation of wealth as a capital. Indeed, in his, Marx conceptualizes capitalistic accumulation as exploitation, namely the exploitation of human by human, and nature by human [5,6]. The functioning and the purpose of capitalism coincide because both are to invest money in order to make profit. The investment is motivated by permanently making and accumulating profits ever larger than the capital. This is the reason why the pressure human exerts on the Earth System has been growing in the United States and Canada from the colonial period to now.

That is to say, in these areas, the origin of capitalism is to trace back in the sixteenth century when the colonists started to fuel the economies of European countries with the wealth looted from American continent. To explore the use of the earth's resources, Barry Lopez scrutinizes the environment through his travels like a scientist. His first remark concerns the cursory appraisals of the land by the newcomers, the colonists. (2) As market mechanisms are dominant in capitalism, not only goods and services, but also land, labor, and capital were bought and sold on markets. Thus, railroads were built, canals were dug, and fields were irrigated in the desert to not only develop agriculture and improve mining operations but also, to easily supply various markets with raw materials.

The concrete and intensive implementation of capitalism started after independence. Singularly, in the United States, it started with the installment of the first government in 1789 when Alexander Hamilton, the first Secretary of the Treasury under President George Washington, instill a capitalistic orientation of American economy. From that year, capitalism has defined the ways in which the production and distribution of goods and services are organized and shape Americans' lives. Capitalism, as a political-economic system, has become a barometer of American civilization. Thus, “contemporary American culture, founded on the original material wealth of the continent,

on its timber, ores, and furs, has become a culture that devours the hearth.” (198) So, the basis for modernity's accomplishments in North America is the capacity of Americans to grow food, produce energy, and extract raw materials.

Accordingly, Western culture differs from Native American cultures by the fact that “native cultures have preserved in both oral tradition and in their personal experience with the land, the highly complex detail of a way of life not yet torn entirely from the fabric of nature.” (203) For instance, if Native Americans made mistakes because they farmed one area too intensively and ruined the soil by using fire, cutting down too many trees for housing and firewood, it was just for survival. There is no abusive exploitation of the land because for them nature and animals in particular are of critical importance to consider as they often represent important cultural values. Concerning American culture, it is characterized by a prodigious consumerism in which the satisfaction of people's needs is supplanted by the realization of profit through capturing surplus value. Obviously, getting profit becomes a goal in itself and often contrasts with people's wellbeing so that the values of the land and wilderness are rendered in economic terms. (81) For example, it is indicated that even simple water is turned into commodity; “it is expensive to maintain, and its owners seek to invest the limited supply profitably.” (29)

Socially, Barry Lopez does not forget to underscore the inequality generated by capitalism among citizens. Simply put, social inequality refers to differences in access to resources, opportunities, and benefits within a society. These differences are revealed in various ways, comprising education, health, income, housing, and other aspects of life. They result from the social structures that favor certain groups over others, creating inequalities in the distribution of wealth and power. In *Crossing Open Ground*, it is clearly stated that the favored social classes are the upper-middle-class elite. (80) This American bourgeoisie owns the means of production such as the timber industry which regards the wilderness as private ownership. This raises the question of the management of the land by American government because it creates and maintains exploitation and inequalities in ownership.

As the commitment of government in economic

activities is limited, the federal government cannot provide efficient protection for the land, wildlife, and the environment. Although wildlife services have been created, some governments have shown hostility to them. In addition, seldom federal preserves were created. Only private individuals, including conservation groups that own some lands do it. But they preserve wildlife principally to hunt them.

Finally, Americans' existence is determined by the capitalist mode of production, its mode of distribution and consumption, its cultural values, and social reproduction. Capitalism remains unsustainable because competition for profit, its driving force, implies a blind tendency to limitless exploitation of natural resources to assure modernity and development. In short, "Capitalism plus Nature = Catastrophe." In a paraphrase, it can be said that "Capitalism plus Nature = Anthropocene [7]."

The Anthropocene and the Socio-Ecological Crises In *Crossing Open Ground*, through careful observation of the ecosystems of North America, precisely Alaska and the Yukon, Barry Lopez shares his experiences of the impact of human actions on nature, thus leading the reader to explore the Anthropocene. "The Anthropocene is characterized by the fact that 'the human imprint on the global environment has now become so large and active that it rivals some of the great forces of Nature in its impact on the functioning of the Earth system'." This means that humans' influence on the environment entails the modification of natural ecosystems and their conversion to human-dominated landscapes [8]. If the Anthropocene has informally been used, it has become widely accepted in the global change research community. It is a term used in the geological, philosophical, cultural, ethical, aesthetic, and political contexts of environmental issues that are truly global in scale. These issues chiefly concern climate change, deforestation, ocean acidification, effects of overpopulation, soil erosion, overfishing and the general and accelerating degradation of ecosystems.

In *Crossing Open Ground*, Barry Lopez views the Anthropocene as the vandalization of nature by humans. To make clear his idea, he establishes a nuance between western people and Native Americans on the issues of the sustainability of nature through a

comparison between Native ancestral use of nature with the aggressive economic and military activities of people of modern America. In fact, modern use of the land is destructive and now human beings are viewed to be a significant force disrupting the Earth system.

Modernity is to trace back to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. And one of the Enlightenment ideas is progressivism, the belief that humans are capable of making unlimited and linear progress which is intimately linked to the obstinate pursuit of endless economic growth. Therefore, the exploitation of natural resources and environmental degradation have become exacerbated in the capitalist world. Barry Lopez provides some cases of the Anthropocene due to economic activities: to begin with industries, modernity and development impose high rates of oil consumption so that the development of oil industries poses threat to life. (155) Oil extraction, whether maritime or terrestrial, is regarded as vandalization and is always harmful to all living beings. In addition, military activities such training troops and equipment testing consisting of tank maneuvers and bombing are significant for the destruction of the Aboriginal sites. (4) Another thing is agriculture, "today, ninety percent of this [winter habitat of gees] has been absorbed by agriculture, industrial and urban expansion." (24)

Obviously, the economic and military expansion that render America great engages the debate on the degradation of ecological conditions leading to the current socio-ecological crisis experienced by America, and more broadly by the globe. The resurgence of natural disasters like heat, flood, diseases, and the extinction of some animal species has become uncontrollable. Truly, humans have a destructive effect on nature so that the harmony and equilibrium of the environment is destroyed. Especially, he uses the image of musical instruments, which play their respective partitions to produce a harmonious sound, to set up the importance of each natural element to maintain sustainable environment and ecosystem. In this context of over-exploitation of natural resources, Greg Garrard states that "deep ecology identifies the anthropocentric dualism humanity/nature as the ultimate source of anti-ecological beliefs and practices [9]".

Besides, it is necessary to understand that modern

use of natural resources significantly contrasts with the precolonial practices of Native Americans. Barry Lopez underscores this fact by providing a description of the historical and cultural aspects of the relationship between humanity and nature. Indeed, he evokes Native American myths and beliefs based on nature. Native American myths reveal a devotion to nature and an awareness of the necessity to honor the natural elements such as animals, water, sacred plants, etc., that gave their lives to sustain human life. In other words, Native American ways of life are closely related to the environment so that in a metaphor Barry Lopez compares it with an Aztec library. (4) The image of the library unveils the fact that Natives are infatuated to work for the sustainability of nature because evidently, they lived in increasingly harmony with it. Evidently, such a culture is likely to ensure the balance and sustainability of our ecosystem.

Conclusion

Barry Lopez explores the ways in which humanity has destroyed and manipulated nature to serve its own need for power, control and status. First, Native Americans' land and their cultural heritage were stripped out under European colonialism. In the name of development, their existence is determined by the capitalist mode of production, its mode of distribution and consumption, its cultural values, and social reproduction. Capitalism remains unsustainable because competition for profit, its driving force, implies a blind tendency to limitless exploitation of natural resources to assure modernity and development.

The demands of modernity and development have led to the occurrence of a socio-ecological crisis. Barry Lopez's recurrent references to Native American culture constitutes an appeal to adopt policies and behavior oriented toward the protection of nature. His work remains a contribution to the current ecological issues.

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